

Ethnography/Ethics/Aesthetics: Strategies in Cross-cultural Film/video

paper given at the May 1991 Society for Cinema Studies meeting, Los Angeles on the panel "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Cross-cultural Media"

Chuck Kleinhans

A major concern in analysing documentary and experimental film and video over the past twenty years, the issue of realism and the critique of realism takes many different forms. Often this issue is argued today in terms of the impossibility of realist representation and the need to find alternative forms. The terms shift from time to time. In the Seventies much of the discussion took place within the framework of Brechtian aesthetics and the Godardian practice of a counter-cinema. Today many carry on much the same concern in terms of a Bakhtinian "dialogism," and feminist film/video practice.¹ The more recent turn of this discussion centers on cross-cultural issues and ethnographic theory and practice. Reasons for this shift readily appear: the international reach of transnational capital, the evolved state of post-colonial societies, and the diasporic movement of international labor are all obvious factors. More locally, as at this conference, the issue of "multiculturalism" becomes an important ground for intellectual discussion and policy making as well as a concern of individual media makers.

Cross-cultural media work raises significant questions for media theory. These questions extend and complicate discussions that otherwise might seem long standing and familiar. In other words, cross-cultural media issues significantly reorient the theoretical issues. Of course in terms of film and video history, cross cultural representation appears at the very start. The Lumiere Brothers early on created an ingenious import/export business in images by having cameramen make travelogue documentaries while the Lumiere company introduced film

¹For example, Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1989).

exhibition around the world. But in the past few years a new set of concerns emerges regarding media making across cultural boundaries creating a discussion which in its broadest sense encompasses Hollywood films set abroad, broadcast foreign news reportage, anthropological film/video making, and much documentary work. By considering two recent experimental documentaries, Louis Hock's **The Mexican Tapes**, and **Unbidden Voices** by Deb Ellis and Prajna Parasher, we can examine the complexity of balancing ethical issues and aesthetic concerns.

The Mexican Tapes is a series of four 55 minute tapes documenting the lives of undocumented Mexican workers in San Diego. Made over a period of several years, Louis Hock began taping his neighbors and friends when he moved into a low income housing unit and began living with undocumented neighbors. Thus the very act of taping produced a record of people breaking the law by being in the U.S. and by working. Obvious ethical questions about the videomaker and subject relationships come up in discussing the tape. Within the tape Hock himself as a narrative presence from time to time makes explicit reference to the act of taping. It is clear that the people depicted trust and like the videomaker. We have his reference at some points to his own intervention in their lives. When a woman suffers from toxic fumes at a job and is taken to the hospital, and the employer doesn't pay the \$1000 bill, Hock tells us he calls the employer hoping that an Anglo voice might change things. "It's none of your business," is the reply. He goes to a lawyer who tells him the risk of deportation is greater than the benefit of going to court. Hock, and we viewers, learn a lesson: that the expectations of middle class Anglo culture are simply not at play in this situation.

The compelling strength of *The Mexican Tapes* lies in letting very ordinary people tell their stories and give their view of events.

I wanted to thank you for your presence and participation in the discussion. I think the students got a lot out of the evening. I hope you realize that I was trying to be provocative to get them to think about certain questions that had come up in one

form or another earlier but which had not been discussed enough in the class.

What did you think of **Naked Spaces**? The first of the two tapes they sent had a horrible tracking problem as you saw, but the second was ok. A shame; I originally expected to have it as a film, but the distributor only has two prints and they were both booked out of the country at the time. It is remarkable as a film: wonderful colors.

I do remain deeply critical of **Re-assemblage** and Trinh's other work on two counts. First, I think it is personal/political/aesthetic bad faith to put forward such sensuous and romanticized and aestheticized images and then act as if the "critical" soundtrack absolves you of any problems or responsibility for them (e.g. she obviously is fascinated with naked breasts but then displaces this onto a supposed male viewer who exists on the soundtrack...why can't she just admit her own interest in the sensuous?).

Second, I think she is obsessed with anthropologists, who actually taken as a group have been a progressive and moderating force (compared to the merchants, military, colonial and post colonial administrators, clergy, etc. who have dealt with native people.). She acts in her creative work and her writings as if she is the first person to ever come up with this critique (admittedly a character flaw of all French trained intellectuals). And she seems particularly obsessed with going after media makers whose home discipline is anthropology while totally ignoring the more obvious film/video makers past and present in her home discipline of film studies (e.g., Jean Rouch, Chris Marker (astounding to have missed those two!), Robert Flaherty, Basil Wright, etc. etc. up to Ulrike Ottinger's Tibet/China stuff.) Again, it seems like bad faith. I think her work is actually very conservative...all those pretty pictures of African women and no reflection on the work being depicted. Women's labor has been devalued by the left and right,

especially domestic labor. I think that Annette's tape is more political (addresses a more substantial political issue) for it actually acknowledges and presents seriously women's labor while also having something to say about representation. To deal primarily and repeatedly with the politics of representation and to end up with nothing very clear to say about it strikes me as a self indulgence of petty bourgeois intellectuals.